REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

March 24, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Zechariah 9:9-10
Matthew 21:1-17

"The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, 'Hosanna'...The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them."
-Matthew 21:9, 14 (NRSV)

It was a "defining moment." A defining moment is an incident of such singular clarity that later, when you think about it, it interprets other incidents and other moments.

* President Lincoln mounting the platform at Gettysburg with his brief address scribbled on the back of an envelope to dedicate a cemetery - was a moment that defined the glory and the tragedy of an era.

* The Marines planting the flag on Iwo Jima - was a moment that defined a war.

* Martin Luther King, Jr. standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and speaking about a dream in which all God's children are free - was a moment that defined a time and a movement.

A defining moment has so much content that it helps illuminate everything that led up to it. It is a still photograph so good that it tells the whole story.

It was a defining moment when Jesus, on the first day of the week of Passover, immediately after a noisy, tumultuous entry to the city, and an altercation with the salesmen of sacrificial animals and money changers in the outer precincts, walked into the Temple, sat down, and blind people and crippled people came to him.

There is a lot going on in that one moment.

It started when he decided to go to the city. For three years or so Jesus of Nazareth had been traveling between the villages of Galilee, teaching in Synagogues. He had built up a bit of a following. His reputation had spread along with rumors that he had power to heal the sick,

that he was not particularly careful about religious customs, and that all sorts of social outcasts were his most enthusiastic advocates. The religious authorities in Jerusalem certainly raised their eyebrows at his liberal interpretations of sacred custom and had sent a delegation or two out into the countryside to hear firsthand what he was saying and to engage him in conversation. There didn't seem to be reason for alarm, however, so long as he stayed in Galilee.

Then he decided to go to the city for the Passover celebration. His closest friends tried to persuade him not to do it. His smartest advisers knew instinctively that it would be a disaster. But it seemed as if the more tentative and frightened they were, the more determined he became. "He set his face toward Jerusalem" is the way one of them who saw it described his determination.

And then, to make matters infinitely worse, when they arrived on the outskirts of the city, he instructed his friends to find a donkey so he could ride into Jerusalem. It seemed very deliberate. He knew that when the people in the city saw it they would recognize immediately a gesture of messianic dimension. The city was filled with patriotic tourists. They were in Jerusalem, after all, to celebrate the nation's Passover, the liberation from foreign domination centuries before. And because the nation currently was dominated and occupied by Rome, patriotic fervor was hot. Hope was high that another liberator, another Moses, would emerge to lead the nation out of its current slavery - the promised, longed-for, waited-for, prayed-for savior. The Messiah! There was a passage in one of the prophetic books which told how it might happen. Everybody knew what Zechariah had written:

> "Lo, your King comes to you;...
> humble, and riding on a donkey,..."

So when he rode a donkey into the city, this popular itinerant Rabbi, there was a near riot. The common people, the ones who are milling around the streets during that weekend holiday in the big city, recognized immediately what he was saying by his behavior. He was claiming the title of Messiah. And so they stripped cloaks from their backs for him to sit on and they waved palm branches and they shouted:

> "Hosanna to the Son of David!
> Blessed is the one who comes in
> the name of the Lord!"

The noisy entourage was headed for the Temple. It must have been quite a scene when he arrived, the yelling crowd waving palm branches and the Passover pilgrims crowding into the Temple to change their money, purchasing sacrificial animals. A predictable altercation ensued. He forced the merchants out of the Temple courtyard and when they left he sat down and people who were not ordinarily there, blind people, crippled people, people who were sometimes intentionally shut out, came to him. And that is the defining moment of Palm Sunday.

John Updike, writing an essay on the Gospel of Matthew in a collection of pieces by contemporary writers on the Books of the New

Testament, suggests that in Matthew "two worlds are colliding. Jesus overthrows common sense... and declares an inversion of the world's order." [Incarnation, p. 8]

It's easy to miss that confrontation, that overthrowing not only of the money changers' tables, but also the overthrowing of popular religious expectation, of what moral behavior means, of what faith demands. It's easy to miss it in our eagerness to turn the day into a celebration. William Stringfellow noted that modern Christians return to Palm Sunday out of "nostalgia for a parade." We want so desperately for our dear Lord to have at least one grand moment of affirmation, we quite miss what's really going on.

"Hosanna" does not mean "Hurray for Jesus." I think the children might have had it right. I think they loved him for the right reasons, as children have a way of doing. I think they laughed and sang and waved to him because they saw - with the innocent clarity of children - his grace and goodness.

But my sense is that for the adults it wasn't that simple. The translation of Hosanna is "Save Now"... "Now Save us... Son of David"... "Save Us... Be Our King. Stir our hearts, call us to sacrifice, rally us around the flag and lead us into battle against our foes who we know are always God's foes." "Save us now, King Jesus, by reclaiming the throne, starting the revolution and establishing the people's republic."

That's what's going on in the parade and I don't know about you but that makes me uncomfortable. First of all because Jesus rejected it, because the defining moment is his eloquent rejection of political opportunism, his refusal to be king, by sitting in God's temple and dealing with the least kingly people he could find, the ones who couldn't even see him, the ones too weak to walk in under their own power.

It makes me uncomfortable because triumphalism and religion seem to go together. The sad story of the Crusades, the effort of Western Christendom to drive the pagans out of the Holy Land and to establish the church by force of arms, is echoed in the 20th century by a new Muslim belligerence bent on ridding Arab culture of Christian infidels.

It's difficult to let go of triumphalism, the hope that one way or another our truth will obliterate everyone else's truth and that our truth must be expressed in a political order which unfortunately doesn't have room for your preferences. It's difficult in the overheated climate of the new evangelicalism to suggest that Jesus Christ calls us to be faithful wherever we are: to pay more attention to faithfulness than to market strategies for getting everybody to agree to our theologies.

It is certainly not a day for attacking the religion of the Temple. Reinhold Niebuhr, in a Palm Sunday sermon at Harvard once said:

> "Let us not observe Palm Sunday by apolemical attitude toward the Jews and a congratulation for Christians that Christianity is superior to Judaism. The distinguished Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, accurately defined the

> differences between the two religions in this way: 'To the Christian, the Jew is a stubborn fellow, who in an unredeemed world is still waiting for the Messiah. To the Jew the Christian is the heedless fellow who, in an unredeemed world, affirms that redemption has somehow or other taken place.'"

"We both still wait," Niebuhr said, "for Jesus to come." [Justice and Mercy, p. 87]

All that crowd wanted that day was what we all want and that is to back a winner, for the good guys to come out on top for once, to be number one. Just a little triumphalism, really. All that crowed wanted was what our culture desperately wants and that is to win, to stand tall and proud again. And I am made uncomfortable by the fact that my Lord did not even pause to acknowledge that, but strode into the Temple and spent his time with blind and crippled people.

Is there any reason to believe he would have it any other way? That he would not spend his time with the poor, oppressed and outcasts, that is, people who know their needs? The city is a glorious place for me, for us. It is hell for others: for 35,000 Chicagoans who are homeless, for the 108,000 who are unemployed. The city is a very dangerous place, not for me, but for the young soldier who survived Desert Storm but was murdered on the streets of Detroit, or for anybody who lives in Cabrini-Greene, and places like Cabrini-Greene, where far more are killed routinely and without notice in the press than our nation lost in Desert Storm. The city is a dangerous place to be a minority child. Our infant mortality rate is higher than Trinidad, Jamaica, Costa Rica, Kuwait. It is a very dangerous place to be poor and sick. One out of six Chicagoans cannot afford health insurance or health care.

Jesus came to a dangerous city and in five days was dead. He was crucified because he challenged the status quo and he sat down and dealt with people who were disposable.

Annie Dillard, writing in the same book I cited earlier, reflects on her childhood exposure to the Bible and Jesus in Sunday School. The Bible was in water color, she observed; the pictures of Jesus were always in pastels: soft, pleasant, lovely. But today, the colors are bright and dense and passionate.

The Jesus of Palm Sunday will not be marginalized, will not be domesticated. The Jesus of Palm Sunday is lordly in his intentionality. That strength of his has inspired others to be true to themselves. In Dag Hammarskjold's memoir, Markings, he writes about his struggle with his own life, his purpose, his sense of vocation. Hammarskjold died while on a peacemaking mission for the United Nations. And before he died he wrote about Jesus on Palm Sunday:

> "A young man, adamant in his committed life... Only recently, he thought, had he began to see more clearly, and to realize that the road of possibility might lead to the cross.

"A young man, adamant in his commitment, who walks the road of possibility... fulfilling the destiny he had chosen." [Markings, p. 68-69]

So Jesus on Palm Sunday invites you to that integrity, to do what you have to do, without reservation: to be true to yourself and to your best notion of what your life is about: to waste no time; to give yourself to your dreams; to spend out your life for love; to risk; to hold nothing back.

And Jesus, on Palm Sunday, in that Temple, reminds the church what its purpose is and - Christian people, disciples - what he expects of and hopes for them.

There is a lot to criticize in the church but sometimes we get it right in acts of courage and faithfulness and compassion: when we welcome those who are not always welcome elsewhere; when the church opens its arms wide to the lonely and lost, regardless of who they are; when the church feeds and shelters, it is reflecting the singularity of that defining moment on Palm Sunday.

Sometimes it is not universally applauded. Sometimes it is a nuisance to try to include everybody. The Jerusalem Temple was not ordinarily accessible to blind and crippled people. There were those who said physical handicaps were the mark of divine disfavor. At the famous Dead Sea community at Qumran, the crippled, deaf, blind, disabled, were not allowed because it was thought that they were not whole. And Matthew reports that after Jesus' eloquent gesture the authorities got very angry.

So, it seems to me the churches, ours included, ought to be more concerned with the matter of how to include people without regard to their color, or gender, or income, or anything else about them. I think we ought to be ashamed at the fact that the only thing that arouses our passionate moral indignation is the danger that the church might somehow become too inclusive.

It is a defining moment. It defines for me the final meaning of this man, this life, and this death. He welcomed the blind and the crippled. And so he does still.

There are no prerequisites: there are no tests to pass, no orthodoxies to uphold. It doesn't matter who you are; whether you are rich or poor, black or brown or white, male or female, a success or a failure.

This Lord sits down and welcomes those who have nothing to bring but themselves.

This Lord rejects power and prominence in order to be accessible to everyone.

This Jesus welcomes those who know their own limitations of sight and strength.

This Jesus, who could have been king and claimed a throne, chose instead a last eloquent gesture of selfless love and a death on a cross.

There are, a poet said, different things going on here:

> "Festivals at which the poor man is king and the consumptive healed, mirrors in which the blind look at themselves and love looks at them back."
>
> "It's a long way off," he said, "but to get there takes no time and admission is free, if you will present yourself with your need only and the simple offering of your faith, green as a leaf." [R. S. Thomas, "The Kingdom,"Later Poems - A Selection.]

It is a defining moment. This year, instead of the triumphalism of the parade, may I presume to suggest that the defining moment of Palm Sunday occurs when he sits down in the Temple and the blind and the crippled come to him. This year, instead of a momentary triumph, an interruption on the way to the cross and resurrection, may Palm Sunday be for you an invitation to bring your need, whatever it is - physical disability, mental or emotional distress, your worries and fears, your doubts, you are invited on Palm Sunday to bring your life to this Lord Jesus who promises that he will not turn you away, but will be your friend, your Lord, your Savior and God - today and forever.

Amen.

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O Lord Christ, as you came this day to Jerusalem, so come now to our city, our church, and our hearts.

As they welcomed you with shouting and dancing, so may this worship celebrate your presence in the world.

And as that festive crowd misunderstood you, so may we be quick to confess our own unwillingness to greet you on your terms.

And as the needy came to you in the Temple, may we now come to receive your love, your forgiveness, your peace. Amen.